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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

2 March 1960

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Prospects in Laos

1. The Laotian Government is now firmly committed to the 24 April date set for national elections.\* Short of an outbreak of Pathet Lao guerrilla activity on a wide scale, the elections will probably be held pretty much on schedule.

2. Kou Abhay's provisional government has made little or no constructive progress in implementing the various economic, administrative, and social programs put together by previous governments for the purpose of introducing national government to the Laotian countryside. After a very slow start in its major task of preparing for the elections, the Abhay government approved

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\*The announced timetable is as follows:

March 9 - deadline for filing candidates  
March 24 - campaign officially begins  
April 24 - election day  
May 11 - new National Assembly to convene.

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a new Election law (February 5),\* and an Electoral Committee, under Vice Premier Nhouy Abhay, has nearly completed gerrymandering the electoral districts. The intent of these measures is to maximize conservative prospects at the polls and to constrict areas of known Pathet Lao strength. Most of the mechanical aspects of the election are now worked out, and an electoral structure favorable, in so far as paper work can make it so, for a conservative victory has been created.

3. However, the conservatives still face the formidable tasks of settling upon a single slate of candidates and carrying their campaign to the people. Continuing cleavages within and between the Lao Hom Lao and the Committee for Defense of the National Interest, still make it uncertain whether or not the conservatives will settle upon and support in good faith a single slate.\*\* Even if the conservatives are

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\*The law provides that a candidate to be successful must obtain 50% of the votes cast in his district. If no candidate receives that percentage of the votes, a second-stage or run off election is to be held two weeks later between the two candidates receiving the largest popular vote. In theory, this provides the conservatives a second chance to campaign and manipulate in the district.

\*\*The two stage provision in the election law provides a certain amount of insurance for the election of conservative candidates in constituencies where a single slate has not been negotiated. It probably also reduces in some Lao minds the strength of the arguments for a single slate.

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forced by the pressure of circumstances to adopt a single slate, the process of elimination will not be conducive to post-election harmony, and many anguished would-be candidates will have to be taken care of.

4. The major unknown in the election equation is what will the Communists do. Pathet Lao guerrilla activities have been small scale and few in number for the past several months, but they have been taking place over an ever-widening area. Pathet Lao agents and small units continue to fan out through the countryside, seeking to subvert and control from the bottom up. Their methods are propaganda playing upon government weakness and historic ethnic antagonisms, and threats and selective "punitive" action to keep the village people in line. The tribal people, particularly the Meo, continue to be a special target for subversion.

5. Radio broadcasts from Hanoi and Peiping, with the exception of an outburst now and then, have generally remained in low key. Recent broadcasts have stressed the issue of the Neo Lao Hak Sat leaders jailed in Vientiane, demanding their release and freedom to participate in the coming elections, and have attacked the Election Law and demanded ICC supervision of the elections.

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6. We believe that the Pathet Lao forces now in Laos have the capability to increase greatly the size and scope of their guerrilla activities. There are probably a considerable number of reinforcements ready or now being trained <sup>in</sup> North Vietnam which could be committed if Hanoi and Peiping should decide on a major Pathet Lao guerrilla effort in Laos. Already the Pathet Lao have de facto control over large areas, particularly in the mountain regions, and we believe they could extend that control to major parts of rural Laos.

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7. The Laotian Army has improved somewhat as a result of the US-French training effort, but it is a long way from being capable of establishing and maintaining law and order throughout the country. The army is conducting security sweeps of Pathet Lao infested areas in preparation for the elections. They will probably eliminate or round up a considerable number of agents and collaborators, but it is highly unlikely that they will be able to greatly reduce Pathet Lao influence in those areas for long. Army efforts to run down Pathet Lao bands and, according to reports, retribution against villages which have cooperated with the Pathet Lao have made the situation of the village people increasingly difficult and have not won local support for the central government.

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8. Civil authorities are increasingly reluctant to venture outside the major towns. At times, the village defense units have defended their homes against Pathet Lao attacks, but equally often they disperse or give up their weapons without a fight. In general the village people tend to "cooperate" with whichever armed force (government or Pathet Lao) happens to be on the scene, or to take to the bush at any sign of trouble. In short, we believe that the security situation, potentially, is considerably worse than the Laotian leaders appear to believe it is.

9. The Communists, i.e. Hanoi and Peiping, have probably been waiting the announcement of the new election districts before deciding their tactics. They may view the elections as an opportunity to continue the struggle for dominance in Laos by political means. Very recent reports suggest that they are preparing a slate of candidates. Their tactics may be to subvert quietly, hoping to lull the government into a false sense of security, with the expectation that the Pathet Lao could control the vote in many areas, thereby holding or increasing the Communist (Neo Lao Hak Sat) and Communist-controlled (Santiphab) representation in the new National Assembly. This would explain the character of recent Hanoi and Peiping propaganda, and might

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explain the continuing low level of guerrilla incidents. On the other hand, it must be increasingly difficult for the Communists to think in terms of another political opportunity in Laos in view of the increasing role of the US in Laos and the hardening anti-Communist trend among most Laotian leaders. If the Communists plan to campaign seriously the fact should be clear by March 9, the deadline for filing candidacies.

10. If the Communists conclude that the elections are so rigged as to deny them the opportunity to resume an important political role, they could seek to discredit the elections by boycott and a propaganda campaign from Hanoi and Peiping. They could also step up guerrilla activity, probably to the point of so disrupting the countryside that elections could be held only in the major towns. This, in effect, would limit the voters almost entirely to ethnic Lao (only about half the population) and would tend to discredit the new assembly. In this case, the government would probably feel obliged to postpone the elections.

11. The Communists could combine these tactics, putting up candidates and campaigning in a normal manner and later boycotting and/or protesting the elections if their candidates

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appeared to be running poorly or were too restricted to campaign effectively. On balance, this is probably their most likely course of action. Neo Lao Hak Sat candidates and communist controlled candidates would probably win a few seats, possibly 10 - 15 of the 59, to prove the point that they retain a following. They would probably accompany this with loud charges, echoed by Hanoi and Peiping, that the elections were rigged. Such tactics could be based upon a premise that the ineptitude and disunity among the conservatives will preclude the development of an effective central government and national administration and result, eventually, in Communist control by default. In this way, the Communists would still be able to make use of both their overt Neo Lao Hak Sat organization on the legal, political front, and continue their efforts to gain de facto control of the rural areas of Laos through their covert apparatus and the Pathet Lao. Meanwhile, the Communists may reason, Laos is a continuing drain on the West and a cause of tension in relations among several Western powers. With relatively little cost and risk the Communists can perpetuate this situation.

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